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Part I: Articulation of the Main Problems

Lacking a Sense of Unity?

At first sight, from a historical point of view, it seems rather absurd to speak about the contribution of the Reformed tradition to the unity of the church. For, to this very day, Reformed people have taken pride in always having confessed their faith in their own way, *in tempore* and *in loco*. The fact that their confessions of faith are always very much products of a certain time and place is not regarded by them as a disadvantage or admission of weakness but rather as a point in their favour. As they see it, this is the way authentic confessing will always take place—confessions are always contextually determined. Some, however, criticize the Reformed people, saying they lack any sense of unity beyond their own region and time.

Especially the Dutch and the Korean Reformed (Presbyterian) churches have a bad reputation because of their many church splits(Holtrop 1993, 97-105 and Park, 2005, 138-171). To refer only to their emphasis on contextuality would be an understatement in this case. Of course, there has to be a reference to sin and lack of awareness of unity as cause of their divisions as well. They divided especially over issues of the structure of the church. What form of ministry is required in the church? What role has the local community to play in governing the church? What are the adequate relations between church and state? (Van de Beek 2002, 124-128), And another type of division was caused by differences on the authority and function of the confessions of faith. Within the Reformed tradition we find churches emphasizing the permanent role of the reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries, and others advocating a more dynamic interpretation of the Reformed heritage (Vischer 1993, 5).

In his preface to a volume of contemporary confessions, *Reformed Witness Today*, Lukas Vischer, former director of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order, quite explicitly links the issue of unity with the historical tradition of confession: "The churches belonging to the Reformed tradition have always been inclined to state their deepest convictions afresh in every new generation. They tend to regard the formulation of confessions of faith as part of the mandate of proclamation entrusted to the church" (Vischer 1982, 7).

Unlike the Lutheran World Federation, whose members regard the Augsburg Confession of 1530 as their doctrinal marker, the Alliance of Reformed Churches, like its counterparts the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council, has no single confession to which all its members subscribe and which all agree to use as a test of membership in the global family. It is up to each member church of the Alliance to adopt confessions, to revise older standards, or to compose new statements. This is the reason why in the Reformed tradition there has never been any kind of conclusion to the doctrinal development as we see, at least officially, in Lutheranism in the *Book of Concord* of 1580 (Sell, 1991, 74-75).

Whereas the national Reformed churches often have a clearly confessional profile, the Reformed tradition as a whole not only lacks a hierarchic teaching ministry but also something like a *hierarchia veritatum*, a hierarchy of truths (Vandervelde 1988, 78-84). Though the discussion around Calvin's well-known distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith seemed to be a step in that direction, in general it may be said that, in international ecumenical dialogues, the Reformed tradition is a complicated discussion partner. In fact, it is

difficult to trace it as discussion partner exactly; its confessional background is too mobile for this (Blei 1982, 14; Vroom 2000, 153-169; Vischer 1999, 1-33).

Two Fundamental Rules of the Hermeneutics of the Reformed Tradition

Looking at the Reformed drive for contextual witness, one always comes across two important, basic assumptions that I would like to point to as fundamental rules of the hermeneutics of the Reformed tradition.

First, the central assumption of every biblical hermeneutics applies here, namely that any human understanding of the Scriptures will be incomplete and will not be able to grasp the meaning of God's Word exhaustively (I Corinthians 13: 9, 12). We can speak here of the epistemological version of the well-known Calvinist theologoumenon, the so-called 'extra-calvinisticum,' which points to Calvin's emphasis on the fact that finite humanity's ability to comprise the infinite divine (*finitum non capax infiniti*) is limited.

Second, the Reformed tradition's essential hermeneutic point of view implies that concentration on one's own current situation of faith necessarily entails a restriction of one's horizon of understanding. Especially in a tradition that is as strongly focused on local churches as the Reformed tradition is, this implies that its theology is always contextual theology and therefore limited.

In the approach of actual Reformed confessional writings, however, these central hermeneutic assumptions have often been disregarded. This disregard, in a sense, has already been implied when a confession's intent is to give a *summa scripturae* (Heppe 1978, 33-41). Such intent suggests that a particular summary offers the most correct and pure interpretation of Scripture.

Disregarding the limited scope of contextual theology results in confessions of faith which, by their names, indicate a certain situational framework – like the sixteenth century Reformed creeds as the *Confessio Scotica*, *Helvetica* and *Belgica* - and yet, judging by their content, have been considered universal, really catholic. To quote the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' (WARC) report, "Towards a Common Testimony of Faith:"

> In general, these confessions have combined a distinctly Reformed understanding of the gospel with the claim that this is a true expression of the apostolic teaching of the one catholic or universal Church. While both universal and Reformed, our confessions have also attempted to relate the unchanging truths of the gospel to changing particulars of place and time and context. (*Seoul 1989* 1990, 171)

In spite of this pretension to universality (catholicity) one has, in fact, always realized the territorially-confined character of one's own confession and never imposed it on other churches, with the exception of one's own missionary churches—one certainly has exported one's own particularity to missionary churches with a certain universal pretension. Therefore, one has every right now to defend the position that "one of the main reasons for the divided state of the Reformed family lies in the history of the missionary movement" (Vischer 1993, 6 and Park 2005, 4 and 220).

Besides the relationship of universality and particularity, another tense connection lies in the relationship of Scripture to confession. In principle, a confession has been regarded as a *norma normata*, a norm established by Scripture, which is the *norma normans*—the final and definite norm. This means that the relationship between the confession and Scripture is clearly one of dependence.

The proper dynamics of this relationship are less obvious than it would appear, though.

The late Dutch theologian Jan Koopmans wrote in his dissertation—one of the best studies on the Reformed concept of tradition—about the relation of Scripture to confession, calling it a "vicious circle for the theological thinking of the churches of the Reformation" (Koopmans 1938). For in these churches the position is held that, on the one hand, no dogma is recognized by any church unless it is grounded in Scripture, while, on the other hand, no exegesis of Scripture is accepted as correct, if it is in conflict with the dogma of the church. In fact this is tantamount to saying that dogma—we might also say here, confession—may rightly be called a rule for exegesis (ibid., 108).

When one is unaware of this tension between Scripture and confession and continues to naively underscore the importance of *sola scriptura*, one is always bound—as would be my thesis—to pay a high price, namely either the doctrinalization of Scripture or a biblicistic foundation for dogma (Wenz 1991, 313). The Evangelical movement, nowadays, quite often suffers from the former shortcoming, Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxy from the latter.

The Reformed, Dutch church historian Cornelis Augustijn points out that the subordination of the confession to the Bible, in time, always results in a subordination of the Bible to the confession. "In practice," he argues, "the aspect of the confession 'being the norm' will always prevail at the expense of the confession 'being established as the norm' by Holy Scripture (as *norma normata*). This is quite obvious; otherwise one would not need a confession. A confession, after all, is much easier to handle as a norm than Scripture" (Augustijn 1969, 39).

The essential meaning of Augustijn's observations is that the Reformed *sola scriptura* can only really function when it is continually accompanied by another principle, namely the *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Justice has only been done to the *sola scriptura* when the church's interpretation of the Bible as written in its confession also can be, in its turn, criticized on the basis of Scripture. To quote a working paper of the WARC entitled, "Contemporary Questions Concerning the Sola Scriptura": "It should be acknowledged that the Reformed churches in the past have claimed to have based their formulations of doctrine on Scripture alone; in fact, they have always interpreted Scripture within a certain (confessional, but also philosophical) tradition." Hence, the working paper continues, "the *ecclesia semper reformanda* surely requires the openness to judge our formulations in the light of our understanding of Scripture, every time anew" ("Contemporary Questions" 1986, 466).

The Relation Between Old and New Confessions

In spite of the fact that in the history of our churches the truth of the principle of the *sola scriptura* has frequently been suppressed, I would like to persist in the fundamental possibility of correction on the basis of Scripture, although new insights into Scripture would be limited insights as well. That immediately raises the next question. Which interpretation is the best—that of the past, for example of the church fathers or of the Reformers, or that of the present, our own interpretations?

This question is all the more urgent for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches because two thirds of this 'world communion of Reformed churches' consists of young churches from Africa and Asia. Within these churches a similar urge for their own witness of faith *in tempore* and *in loco* may be observed as was the case with the Reformed fathers from the sixteenth century onwards. The best-known of these new confessions is probably the Belhar confession of 1982. The Belhar confession is a fierce charge that was formulated from within the circles of the black (coloured) Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa and aimed against the theology behind the South African policy of apartheid (Villa-Vicencio 1986, 241-243 and Smit 2003, 130-159).

With respect to these new confessions, Vischer, in his preface to *Reformed Witness Today*,

raises a number of hermeneutical questions. He asks, for example, "How is the relation of the old and the new to be understood? Are the earlier confessions the criterion for judging the new? Or are the old to be read in the light of the new?...How are the differences to be evaluated?" (Vischer 1982, 8).

Vischer has raised the question of which criteria should be used when discussing the continuity of a tradition. The question is especially complicated in relation to the Reformed tradition. Within Reformed circles there never has been a *single* church that wished to make its confession the only confession recognized. Although many a church has cherished this as its most profound wish, a concrete attempt towards this, Vischer argues, has never been undertaken. There is, however, for Reformed churches a great and growing need for an exchange of insights on the fundamental issues they face as they confess the faith in their situation. Even a legitimate, contextual confession such as the Belhar confession needs a certain exchange with other contemporary confessions and with confessions of the past.

Part II: Systematic Reflections

The 'Church-dissolving' Element within the Reformation

A great need for exchange is not new within the Reformed tradition. From the very beginning one realized that the church of Christ is greater than one's own church and that it is impossible to be a church isolated from other fellow baptized believers. This awareness of the need for communion with other believers, elsewhere, in the present, and in the past, has been enhanced by the admission that the *sola scriptura* principle contains not only a church-reforming element but also a church-dissolving element.

I derive the formulations 'church-reforming' and 'church-dissolving' from one of the greatest thinkers of the Dutch Reformed tradition, Herman Bavinck of whom a Korean translation of his *Dogmatics I-IV is forth coming*. In his 1888 rectorial address, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," he argues that an unbridled appeal to Scripture also opens the way to a sectarianism in which every heretic has his own (Scriptural) letter. Bavinck writes that, "in the Protestant principle [the *sola scriptura* principle] next to a church-reforming element, there is indeed a church-dissolving element. The *one* Christian church has fallen apart into countless small churches and sects, of associations and societies" (Bavinck 1888, 38). He rightly puts his finger on the strongly individual character of the Calvinist attitude towards faith, which also left its traces in the Calvinist attitude towards the church. They tend to look upon the church as an association of individuals.

In particular, it is this attitude towards faith that, in the field of the doctrine of the church, has been converted into a striving for the purest church, the *ecclesia purissima*. It was this very striving that, in spite of all honest intentions, left a trail of destruction in the Reformed churches. It demoted the church to a random group of kindred spirits, while seriously underestimating the role of the church as a mother, to use an expression from Calvin (*Institutes,* 1559, IV, 1.4 and Vischer 2000, 25-56). The idea that the church existed a long time before us and that it is *the* instrument of God's loyalty to us through the ages was developed within the Reformed tradition in the theology of the covenant. Unfortunately, there remained an unsolved tension between the doctrine of the covenant and the doctrine of election in the Reformed tradition; and therefore, the doctrine of the covenant couldn't take the central place it had earned in Reformed ecclesiology (Weir, 1990).

Calvin's Preface to the Geneva Catechism

As a counter-movement against a certain sectarianism in the Reformed tradition there have been unmistakably universalizing tendencies as well. A good example of this is Calvin's preface written in 1545 for his own Latin translation of the Geneva Catechism of 1542. There, Calvin writes:

> We should apply ourselves with all possible means so that the unity of faith, so much recommended by Paul, may again become strong among us. With a view to this goal, the solemn profession of faith (*solemnis fidei professio*), which is part of the common baptism, should especially be applied. It would be desirable that there be a permanent unanimity among all with respect to the doctrine of piety, and also *one* catechism (*unam formam catechismi*) for all churches. (Calvin 1545)

In the continuation of his preface, however, Calvin immediately points out that he is a realist: "For many different reasons, however, it will always remain so that each church has its own catechism. Therefore, we should not put too much pressure on it, as long as the difference in the way of education does not prevent us from thereby being led towards the one Christ" (ibid., 5-6).

It is clear from the concrete suggestions Calvin makes for preserving unity in Christ that, for Calvin, this piously formulated view of reality is not a stopgap intended to make a virtue of necessity. Thus, first of all, he considers it useful that there are public testimonies (*publica testimonia*) whereby churches that are separated geographically but are uniform in doctrine in Christ mutually acknowledge one another. Calvin points out that, for this purpose, bishops in former times used to send synodical letters. Certainly now that Christianity is suffering from such an upheaval, he considers it necessary to give each one this token of Holy Communion (*sacra communio*) and to accept this from each other. Calvin formulates three criteria for genuine ecumenism: open and public professing, intensive correspondence, and mutual recognition. Up to now these three criterions are incorporated in several Reformed church orders (constitutions) as basic rules for the relation with 'sister churches': mutual recognition of each others confessions, intensive correspondence with regard to important events (including invitations to visit each others synods) and mutual recognition of ministries. These rules also constitute the core of the European Church Fellowship between Reformed and Lutheran Churches, founded upon the so-called Leuenberg Agreement of 1974 (*Leuenberg Agreement*, 1989).

The Endeavour of a Harmonia Confessionum

Apparently Calvin's ecumenical disposition was known in Europe. Seven years later, in 1552, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, approached Calvin with a concrete plan for arriving at a mutual recognition of confessions of faith and thus perhaps even at a common confession of faith. Calvin was very enthusiastic in his reaction. He would be prepared, he wrote to Cranmer, to cross ten seas for that (*Calvini Opera* XIV, 306 and 312-314 and *Crossing Ten Seas*, 2004, 2-3). But as a result of subsequent political developments particularly in Germany and England, very little of the necessary legwork for the plan was carried out. In the end, the idea of a common confession of faith was abandoned.

In 1581 however, something was brought up that, in a sense, may yet be considered as an echo of the plan for a common confession. A *Harmonia Confessionum* was drawn up, a collection of Reformed and Lutheran confessional writings that are more or less considered to be in harmony with each other. Later editions in 1612 and 1652 even included the Confession of Cyrillus, the Patriarch of the Greek Church of Constantinople, who was in touch with Reformed people. An

important change in these later editions is the placing of the apostolic confession of faith, as a common symbol of faith, at the beginning of the collection. Additionally the collection concludes with an elaborate paragraph that emphasizes the agreement between the content of the confessions of faith and the ecumenical councils and the church fathers. In this way there was an attempt to formulate the *consensus catholicus* with the ancient church (H*armonia Confessionum* 1581).

No edition of a *Harmonia Confessionum* has ever gained church authority, but the effort towards such a *Harmonia* is, nevertheless, characteristic of a certain spiritual attitude, which breaks through the strict particularity of one's own national church and expressly looks for continuity with the church of all times and places. It is a kind of minimum, where the maximum of *one* confession of Protestants in Europe had proved to be unattainable.

More than a century later, on the eve of the Enlightenment, we see again some efforts to come to a common confession—this time not only between Protestants but also between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The efforts emerged around the person of Leibnitz. Just like the last attempt, this bold plan, brilliantly and dramatically described by the French historian Paul Hazard in his extraordinary study on *La crise de la conscience européenne* (Hazard 1935), also was doomed to failure.

Part III: The Potential Reformed Contribution to Church Unity

The Reformed Tradition and the World Council of Churches

We may conclude that the Reformed tradition never lost its sense of unity with the church of all ages and centuries. However, whenever Christians pursue the question of their common confession of faith, two fundamental options emerge. The first option is to realize that 'we are not the first' and therefore conform to that cloud of witnesses who went before us. The second is to listen to the voice of contemporary witnesses of faith around us (Vischer 1978, 95-109).

In 1971 at the Faith and Order Commission (Louvain), the World Council of Churches started a project aimed at developing a common expression of faith. It seemed beyond question that precedence would be given to the second approach, that is listening to what is unanimous in the midst of the multitude of voices of all those who continue to hope against all odds. The tenor at Louvain was that a common expression of faith can only be adequately formulated in *one* way, namely "by giving account of the hope within us." Upon studying the impressive, sometimes even heart-rending, testimonies collected from many continents within the framework of this project, it becomes clear that a contextual approach towards a common articulation of faith was the original plan (*Faith and Order* Louvain 1971, 215-216, 239-240; Neelankavil 1999, 61-65). But it is also clear that trying to trace what is common among the multitude of witnesses is not an easy task.

It was natural then that, within the World Council of Churches, a counter-movement soon commenced. This counter-movement tracks its roots to a "building period" of the church. On the basis of a kind of *principium quinque-saecularis*, for example, the first five centuries of the church are declared to be constitutive for the consequent history of the church in such a way that the confessions formed during these centuries become sacrosanct.

This approach, however, raises many complicated questions. For example, how does one take into account the exact historical circumstances in which the first creeds were formulated? Were not these creeds, too, products of very specific contexts? And if they were, can they simply be universalized? In asking these questions one acknowledges that a study of even the ancient church's creeds cannot avoid the question of the mediating role of context (Brinkman 1995, 61-63).

Every testimony of faith bears the traces of the time and the place in which it is

pronounced. This would be music to Reformed ears if it were not that this recognition immediately rebounds to their own tradition like a boomerang. For, do not Calvinists tend to speak about a constitutive period in church history that is expressly exempted from the vortex of history, namely the initial period of the Reformation? Do they also not start from a kind of "building period" of the church, namely the sixteenth century?

It is clear that an approach that is explicitly based on the particularity of every tradition does not facilitate mutual recognition and acknowledgment in world Christianity. With the challenges that confront Christians in our present-day, worldwide society, common Christian witness and activity do not benefit from an exclusivist contextualization of our expressions of faith.

The Task of the Reformed Tradition

Because of its focus on local churches, the Reformed tradition may be particularly gifted to cope with this tension between particularity and contextuality and between universality and catholicity (without completely identifying the latter two concepts). Universality points to the synchronic aspect of Christianity. Catholicity points both to the synchronic as well as to the diachronic aspect. Additionally, catholicity points to the content of the Christian message throughout the ages and places, namely to the 'being in Christ' of all Christians. The Reformed tradition has left shameful marks of division of faith throughout the history of Christianity. That is the negative influence of the Reformed tradition. One might, however, speak also of the Reformed tradition as an illuminating example. There are not many other traditions where the enculturation of the gospel has left such inspiring marks. For more than two decades, it is impossible to imagine the WARC without the remarkable voices of, for example, the churches of Korea, Taiwan, India, Indonesia and black South Africa. It might be that especially the Reformed tradition is able to make a virtue out of a necessity and to change one of its weakest points – its exclusive commitment to the local situation - to one of its strongest points: its preparedness to incorporate a strong awareness of contextuality into its concept of catholicity.

During its general assembly at Seoul, Korea (1989), WARC made the following statement regarding the relationship of gospel to culture: "The gospel must not be used to promote a 'levelling-out' of culture, everything the same everywhere." The report acknowledges that the gospel illuminates every culture, that it holds every culture, as it were, up against the light of the proclamation of Christ. But the report also acknowledges that up to a point every culture illuminates our understanding of the gospel: "Different cultures can perceive in the Gospel that which other cultures had failed to perceive" (*Seoul 1989* 1990, 77-178).

My conclusion is that the Reformed tradition is pre-eminently a tradition in which the contextual articulation of faith has acquired a legitimate place but in which, nevertheless, the pretension to contextually formulate the universal truth in Jesus Christ has been upheld continuously and seriously. We can learn from the Reformed tradition that developing an authentic sense of unity does not require that one refrain from contextuality. Rather, unity can be developed as one adheres to a kind of contextuality that exceeds its own boundaries in order to proclaim the worldwide dimensions of the gospel (Vandervelde 1997, *Exchange*, 2-39; and 1997, *Ecumenical*, 46-60).

Just as a contextual interpretation of the gospel does not, in itself, imply a legitimization of the local situation, so also a contextual interpretation is not bound by definition to its specific context. When, for example, an interpretation of the gospel in a particular situation points to injustice or to liberation or to forgiveness, this interpretation is not simply a contextual claim. It may provide an insight that needs to be tested and amended or applied in other contexts.

Bonhoeffer, King, Gandhi, and Romero, among others, reflected profoundly on their particular situations. They are instructive examples of the universalizing potentialities of particular situations. No contextual interpretation, however, can claim to be absolute. Thus, the gospel is contextual in that it is inevitably embodied in a particular culture; and it is catholic in that it expresses the apostolic faith handed down from generation to generation within the communion of churches of all particular places and ages (Brinkman, 2001 173).

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